

**THE THIRTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST**  
**August 30, 2009B**

*HOMECOMING SUNDAY*

James 1:17-27

*The children in the church were invited to come gather around me in front of the altar.*

What's a dream? *(The children put up their hands and share what a dream means to them!)*  
We all have dreams, don't we? I try to remember my dreams because I believe that God sometimes surprises us and *whispers* to us while we're dreaming. I'd like to read a story to you this morning about dreams. This is a book called "God's Dream" and it's written by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and Douglas Carlton Abrams. If you like, you can lie on the sanctuary floor, close your eyes and pretend like you're sleeping. The important thing is to quietly listen as I share "God's Dream" with you.

*"Dear Child of God, What do you dream about in your loveliest of dreams?..."*

We make God's dream come true through our sharing, loving and caring. It's why we've come together as we have on this Homecoming Sunday for one service: to eat and drink, to play and laugh (and even do some things we'd never do anywhere else perhaps, like sit in a dunk-tank!) all because we are God's children. And as members of our St. Paul's parish family, we need each other to help make God's dream come true. And so, enjoy today, a day of fun and celebration, as we remember whose we are and to whom we belong.

*I'd like now to speak to the youth and adults.*

This story I just shared with our children can easily be a commentary on the Letter of James. James is very clear in speaking to the Christian community in Jerusalem that we are, indeed, all brothers and sisters in Christ and that our differences need not create factions or cliques. He acknowledges that no one can force us to be friends or to love one another and that, in fact, tensions and barriers and different perspectives and opinions are all part of who we are as a community of faith. Anyone who's ever been involved in any organization knows that it takes many different personalities with many different gifts, and a willingness to become involved as committed members, for the organization to be healthy and to grow in its mission. It's no different for us as church. We need one another. And we need to model for the world in the way we relate to one another that "each of us carries a piece of God's heart within us and that when we love one another, the pieces of God's heart are made whole." We need one another to live with conviction and passion that it's not just through our own efforts and commitment to the mission of the church, but through our individual and community openness to God's gifts and indwelling Spirit, that we're able to accomplish more than we can ask or imagine.

Think for a moment about the first time you came to this church. (Of course for many here it was the chapel next door – and maybe even a few came shortly after it was built in 1930!) What do you remember? Who reached out with a warm welcome – and if perhaps no one did, what made you continue to return? The point I want to make is that we need one another and most times can't see how it's the hand of God leading us to where we need to be in ways which aren't easily discernible. We might think we've chosen St. Paul's as our church home (whether we've grown up here all our life or just started coming a short time ago), when the spiritual truth might actually be that God is the one who brings us together. "You didn't choose me," Jesus says, "I've chosen you" – and the response to that invitation of his has led many of us to lots of different and varied communities and churches. And here we are today, marking as a parish family the start of a new school year with a Homecoming Celebration. Be aware of God's Spirit within **you**. Be aware of God's grace at work in and among us. And then, as James exhorts us in his message today – so we don't just look at ourselves in the mirror and then forget whose we are and to whom we belong, **do something** to act on this gift and grace we're given. For we are called to be part of God's family. And while we're just a small part of God's whole family, a microcosm if you will, we are, nonetheless, recipients of God's generous and gracious gifts.

I spent this weekend at Camp Trinity with close to 40 members of our Diocese of East Carolina on a Re-visioning Conference called by Bishop Daniel. As a church, we are in the midst of re-thinking how we do youth and young adult ministry and the conference was the start of exploring new ways of sharing the good news of God's love in Christ with youth and young adults. Two things in particular struck me which I already knew, but heard as if for the first time. The first is that the church is probably the only institution that ultimately doesn't exist primarily for its members, but for those who are not members – those who on any given Sunday might perhaps muster up the courage to cross the invisible but very real threshold into unfamiliar territory called a church – not able perhaps to articulate the deepest hunger of their hearts and souls, which leads them there in the first place. They need the welcoming reassurance of God's gracious hospitality through those who are members. Who welcomes them makes a big difference. The second thing I took from the conference is what keeps me passionate about my own membership and commitment to Christ in the church – and that is: if we take seriously our role as sisters and brothers of one another through Christ as members of a parish family, the church is where we can bring both our deepest joys and our deepest pain. What other place can we go to when we encounter sickness or life-threatening illness? Or experience loss, whether it is the death of a loved one or the death of a marriage or friendship? Or when we're feeling depressed, broken, and in need of healing? When we lose a job and find ourselves in an insecure and uncertain time of life? When our kids make choices we wish they didn't make, and don't know to whom we can talk to find some comfort and direction? Or when we need the grace of a fresh start, a new beginning, knowing that God is with us. I continually meet people at unexpected moments who thank me that St. Paul's opens its doors most nights of the

week to help people face their addictions in a supportive NA community. It's doing what James encouraged his first century parish family to do. These are but just a few of the challenges and struggles members of Christ's household face - and it's not just about the unexpected events and challenges - the crosses, so to speak, we end up carrying. It's also about the joy and enthusiasm, the hopes and dreams we have in being part of a family where we know we are loved with an unconditional love by a gracious, welcoming and forgiving God who is always with us through the presence of the Risen Jesus in our midst.

God dreams about people sharing. God cares about people caring. God is a gracious giver and expects us to reach out, making a difference in our world by sharing this gift called life in love and service to others. May God's dream inspire and move us in this New Year!

I've asked a member of our church to say a few words, and before she does, let me say that as a parish priest, there are moments I am welcomed into the intimacy of your lives when the presence of God is very palpable to me. Some of those moments are moments of utter helplessness when all I can do is simply 'be there,' trusting God's healing and forgiveness in my own life to use me as an instrument of healing and forgiveness for others.

We've prayed for Judith Yongue for many months now, as many of you know. After being here for Sunday services on Palm Sunday this past April 5<sup>th</sup>, the start of Holy Week, she spent time later in the day with her family at dinner. And on her way home, she was in a horrible automobile accident. To say she was on the threshold of death's door is no hyperbole. It seemed like an eternity - a very long time, it's all a blur, but I remember the Sunday, months later, when I brought flowers after church which the flower guild makes available so joyfully and generously for the sick and homebound. I walked into her hospital room and there she was, sitting in a wheel chair awake and alert. She welcomed me with a wonderful smile. And all I could say was, "Happy Easter" Judith! We talked about resurrection and new life - and she asked that day if she might be able to take a few moments one Sunday to speak to our parish family. And I thought last week that today's Homecoming Sunday would be a good day for Judith to share her message. And so we 'welcome home' Judith Yongue!

*(Judith shared a beautiful message - a personal testimony which touched the hearts of all of us.)*